DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 389 HE 020 240

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TITLE Enrollment Management: Factors That Influence College Choice. AIR 1986 Annual Forum Paper.
PUB DATE Jun 86
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (26th, Orlando, FL, June 22-25, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Applicants; *College Choice; Decision Making; Engineering; *Enrollment Influences; Geographic Regions; Higher Education; Institutional Characteristics; Institutional Research; Liberal Arts; Place of Residence; Prestige; *Private Colleges; Public Colleges; School Location; School Size; Student Costs
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum; *Tufts University MA

ABSTRACT

Factors that influenced applicants' decisions to attend Tufts University, a private institution in Massachusetts, were studied based on a 1985 survey. Enrollment decisions were examined for the following groups: matriculants and nonmatriculants, liberal arts and engineering applicants, applicants from each of seven geographic regions, applicants who chose to attend Tufts over six top competitors, and applicants who chose to attend public institutions. Applicants completed a survey and listed in order of importance the three factors that most influenced their final college choice. Location was one of the most frequently cited factors for the total sample and for each of the subgroups examined. Both institutional prestige and academic reputation were frequently cited as important factors in the final college choice by accepted applicants. Size was an important factor for students selecting Tufts over some of its major competitors, while finances were an important factor for students who decided to attend public universiites. Factors that were cited less frequently were: the social environment, the adult influence, admissions activities, athletics, and postgraduate jobs. (SW)

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This paper was presented at the Twenty-Sixth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Marriott Orlando World Center, Orlando, Florida, June 22-25, 1986. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

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ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT: FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE COLLEGE CHOICE

Dawn Geronimo Terkla and Susan M. Wright
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There are many decisions to be made along the route from high school to college. This paper focuses on one aspect of that process--making the final college choice. We present the factors that applicants accepted to Tufts University[1] report as being most important in their final choice of an institution. After examining factors influencing the decisions of these accepted applicants, we look at subgroups of this population to see if they were influenced by a different set of factors. These groups include: (1) matriculants and non-matriculants, (2) liberal arts and engineering applicants, (3) applicants from each of seven geographic regions, (4) the set of applicants who chose to attend Tufts over six top competitors, and (5) applicants who chose to attend public institutions.

College applicants offer numerous reasons for their final selection of a college or university. Some are very specific ("my best friend, ...[name

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1. Tufts is a private university composed of four undergraduate colleges and seven graduate and professional schools. The university enrolls approximately 4,400 undergraduates in programs centered on a suburban campus located about eight miles from Boston.

of person], is a sophomore"), and some are more general ("the atmosphere"). Applicants may be impressed by the quality of the faculty or the appearance of the campus. Some seem to contradict each other: "I chose you because I wanted a large school"; "I chose you because I wanted a small school". Categorizing these responses and examining them in the aggregate provides officials with insight into the final college selection. Enhanced understanding of these factors can be an important component of an institution's marketing plan.

The data for this study were obtained from a survey of the 1985[2] applicants accepted to Tufts and from the university's application form. The survey was mailed in the late spring to those accepted applicants from the United States. This timing insured that most applicants knew the acceptance decisions of the institutions to which they had applied and had chosen the institution at which they would matriculate. The 1985 response rates were sixty-six percent for matriculants, and forty-six percent for non-matriculants.

In the survey, applicants were asked to list in order of importance the three factors which most influenced their final college choice. Their statements were coded according to a scheme largely based on the results of factor analysis conducted at Tufts in 1981 and 1982. That analysis examined students' assessment of the influence of each of a series of specific variables on their decision to attend (or not attend) Tufts and the school

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2. Data are also available for the 1981-1984 accepted applicants, but as the factors cited in those years do not differ markedly from those cited in 1985, only the 1985 data is included in this report.

they would have attended (or did attend). After the initial coding, the data was collapsed for this analysis into the categories shown in Table 1.

Not all students chose to list three factors. For this report we are comparing the percent of respondents who cited a factor, whether as a first, second, or third choice. For example, in Table 2 which presents the percentage of cases citing a factor from each of the response categories, location emerges with the greatest percent of responses. However, if we were to examine the most frequently selected first choice, prestige would be most frequently selected (32.2% of the respondents), and location would be ranked third (17.6%).

RESULTS

Accepted Applicants

The location of the institution, prestige, and academics are the most frequently cited factors in the matriculation decisions of the accepted applicants (66.4%, 54.9%, and 42.2%, respectively). Factors which are cited a bit less frequently include: the social environment (23.0%), the size of the institution (21.7%), and finances (18.8%). Less than ten percent of the applicants cite adult influence (6.7%), admissions activities (5.8%), athletics (5.5%), or postgraduate jobs (2.9%) as one of the three factors most influencing their final college choice.

Tufts' Matriculants and Non-Matriculants

Table 3 highlights the responses for Tufts' matriculants and non-matriculants. As is true for the total sample, for both matriculants and

non-matriculants location, prestige, and academics are the three most frequently cited factors in applicants' final college choice. The frequency of these responses varies, however. Over eighty percent of matriculants cited location, as compared to fifty-three percent of non-matriculants. Matriculants also more frequently cited prestige (62.9% vs. 48.3%), but were less likely to include academics (37.4% vs. 46.2%). Examining the factors selected by the students opting to attend Tufts over one of its competitors provides more insight into these factors influencing matriculants and non-matriculants. For example, as is demonstrated later in this report, matriculants selecting Tufts over more highly rated institutions[3] cited different factors than those selecting Tufts over a lower-ranked set of institutions.

Engineering and Liberal Arts Applicants

For Tufts, the two largest undergraduate colleges are Liberal Arts and Engineering.[4] Applicants to these colleges are treated similarly in the Tufts' application process. Since the programs are quite different, as are the demographic profiles of the students who apply, we examine whether differences exist in the factors influencing matriculation decisions for these two groups of students.

Despite the difference in programs, our findings are that applicants accepted to the College of Engineering and those accepted to Liberal Arts

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3. Barron's 1984 rankings.

4. Tufts' liberal arts colleges are identified as the College of Liberal Arts for men, and Jackson College for women.

cite similar factors. Their choices, therefore, are similar to those reported by accepted applicants. The engineering group was, however, more likely to cite academics (56.6% of case vs. 39.9%).

Regional Groups

When one compares the factors that are important for applicants from each region[5] of the country, the similarities across the regions are striking (Figure 1). Location, prestige, and academics are the first, second and third most frequently cited factors by applicants from every region except the Mid-West. Applicants from the Mid-West cited academics more frequently than prestige. The fourth and fifth factors for each region are either finances, social environment, or size.

In this initial examination, we do not note striking differences across regions in the factors which influence final college choice. It must be remembered that although these applicants are from different regions, the institutions about which they are deciding may be in the same region.

Applicants Selecting Tufts Over Top Competitors

Tufts' matriculants reported which institution they would have attended, if not Tufts. Presumably, the college decision factors for these students apply particularly to the decision between Tufts and that institution. We separately examine the college decision factors for six of the top-ranked "if

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5. For purposes of this analysis the United States is divided into seven regions: (1) Massachusetts, (2) New England, excluding Massachusetts; (3) Middle-Atlantic states, (4) New York and New Jersey, (5) the South, (6) the Mid-West, and (7) the West.

not Tufts" institutions. Three of these institutions had a higher rating in the 1984 Barron's than did Tufts--Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania, and Northwestern. The other three institutions either ranked lower or the same as Tufts: Brandeis, Boston College, and Boston University.

Table 4 presents for each of the more highly ranked institutions the percent of cases citing each of the choice factors. Table 5 presents this information for the lower-ranked institutions. For each of the more highly ranked institutions, location is the most frequently cited factor, and size ranks either second or third. The undergraduate population at Tufts is approximately half that at these institutions, so presumably these students were influenced by Tufts smaller size. Two of these institutions, Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, are both among the most frequently selected choices of Tufts' accepted applicants who choose to matriculate elsewhere, and among the most frequently cited by matriculants as the "where if not Tufts" institutions. Thus, it is particularly valuable to understand why applicants accepted to these top competitors are choosing Tufts.

For students choosing Tufts over the lower-ranked set of institutions, prestige is consistently cited as one of the top three factors, as is location. The frequent selection of location as a factor may be surprising given the proximity of all these institutions to Boston. It does serve to illustrate, however, the wide range of dimensions which location captures: ranging from distance from home for a California applicant to convenient access to public transportation for an applicant from the local area.

The factors influencing final college choice for the set of students

electing to attend our top decision stage competitors is difficult to interpret relative to Tufts. In spite of all having been accepted to Tufts, these students vary as to whether their final choice of a college involved Tufts.

Applicants Attending Public Institutions

Over the past two or three years, public institutions have begun to appear among the set of institutions to which Tufts' accepted applicants have most frequently applied, and among the set from which they receive the most offers of acceptance. Because of this development, we were particularly interested to see if those accepted applicants electing to attend public institutions were motivated by a different set of factors in making their final college choice. As Table 6 illustrates, finances is the factor cited by the highest percentage (66.7) of this group. This is a marked contrast to the role finances plays in the decisions of the other groups examined. For example, it ranks sixth among factors cited by total respondents, and fifth for factors cited by non-matriculants.

Location of the institution and academics (54.8% and 39.3%, respectively) are the next most frequently cited factors by those attending public institutions. The citing of these as top factors is similar to what we have seen for the other groups examined. It appears that while those selecting publics differ significantly from our other applicant groups in the influence of finances in their final college selection, the other factors in their final college decision are similar. If changes in federal financial aid policies, state scholarship programs, or institutional pricing policies

alter the importance of finances for a larger proportion of the applicant pool, they, too, may select public institutions.

DISCUSSION

This examination of factors has given us a better understanding of what influences Tufts' accepted applicants in their final college choice. It is important to remember that we did not examine the factors which influence students in deciding the set of institutions to which they will apply. The influences at this earlier stage in the college selection process may be very different.

Location is the most frequently, or one of the most frequently cited factors, for the total sample, and for each of the subgroups examined. Recently Tufts' literature for prospective applicants has emphasized the benefits of the institution's proximity to Boston. Location should continue to be emphasized in the literature. Because it is such an important factor, we should examine applicants' perceptions of Tufts' location, and their evaluation of the attractiveness conveyed by that perception. We may wish to examine this for applicants from different geographic regions. It should prove insightful to know which aspects of location are most important.

Both institutional prestige and academic reputation were frequently cited as important factors in the final college choice by our accepted applicants. Few would argue that Tufts has grown in prestige and academic reputation over the past ten years. As these are such important factors in the final selection of a university, we want to ensure that the public's perception of Tufts has kept pace with the changing university.

Size is a factor which was important for students selecting Tufts over some of our major competitors. Those competitors have undergraduate programs that are twice the size of Tufts'. We may wish to emphasize our size in our literature, as size clearly and objectively distinguishes us from these institutions.

We demonstrated that a number of factors were not as important to our accepted applicants as we anticipated. Some of these factors may be strong influences at other stages in the college choice process. Perhaps such factors as adult influence, admissions activities, campus appearance, and the diversity of the student body are more influential when individuals are deciding to which institutions to apply. We expected that finances would be an important factor to the majority of our accepted applicants. However, this was true only for those attending public institutions.

In recent years, colleges and universities have become increasingly active in using survey and other data collection techniques to help them understand the college decision process. In part, this is a reaction to projections that the number of high school graduates will decline some 15-20% over the next 15 years (McConnell & Kaufman, 1984; Ihlanfeldt, 1981). Faced with the possibility of declining enrollments, institutions have become more concerned with their ability to fill and/or maintain the quality of their entering freshmen classes. In response to this changing climate, Tufts began formal admissions research in 1981.

Tufts' yield rate of accepted applicants is relatively low in comparison to those of our top competitors. In 1985, thirty-four percent of the

accepted applicants chose to attend. In contrast, the average yield rate for thirty-three of our competitors was approximately forty-six percent. Increasing our yield would be a good defense against the decline in applications which has been projected based on changing demographics. Understanding the factors influencing the final college choice will be a key component in the development of a plan to increase our yield.

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McConnell, William R. and Norman Kaufman. High School Graduates: Projections for the Fifty States Boulder, Co.: Western Interstate Commission of Higher Education, 1984.

TABLE 1

FACTORS IN COLLEGE CHOICE

LOCATION (area opportunities, climate, distance from home)

FINANCES (cost, financial aid)

ADMISSIONS' ACTIVITIES (admissions' tours or receptions, publications)

PRESTIGE (reputation)

ACADEMICS (competition, faculty reputation, special academic programs/ departments, research opportunities, diversity of courses)

SIZE

STUDENTS

ADULT INFLUENCE (influence of parents or other relatives, alums, other relatives)

ATHLETICS

PHYSICAL PLANT (campus appearance/design, facilities, housing)

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT (social events, atmosphere, "feel")

POSTGRADUATE JOBS

OTHER

TABLE 2

FACTORS INFLUENCING FINAL COLLEGE CHOICE
FOR
ACCEPTED APPLICANTS

Factor	Percent of Cases
Location	66.4%
Prestige	54.9%
Academics	42.2%
Social Environment	23.0%
Size	21.7%
Finances	18.8%
Students	13.5%
Physical Plant	11.7%
Other	8.2%
Adult Influence	6.7%
Admissions' Activities	5.8%
Athletics	5.5%
Postgraduate Jobs	2.9%

Number of Cases = 1615

TABLE 3

FACTORS INFLUENCING FINAL COLLEGE CHOICE
FOR
TUFTS' MATRICULANTS AND NON-MATRICULANTS

Factor	MATRICULANTS Percent of Cases	NON-MATRICULANTS Percent of Cases
Location	81.8%	53.8%
Prestige	62.9%	48.3%
Academics	37.4%	46.2%
Size	23.7%	20.2%
Social Environment	23.5%	22.6%
Finances	13.6%	23.0%
Students	12.2%	14.5%
Physical Plant	8.3%	14.5%
Adult Influence	7.0%	6.5%
Admissions' Activities	5.8%	5.9%
Athletics	5.8%	5.3%
Other	5.6%	10.4%
Postgraduate Jobs	1.5%	4.1%
Number of Cases =	727	888

FIGURE 1

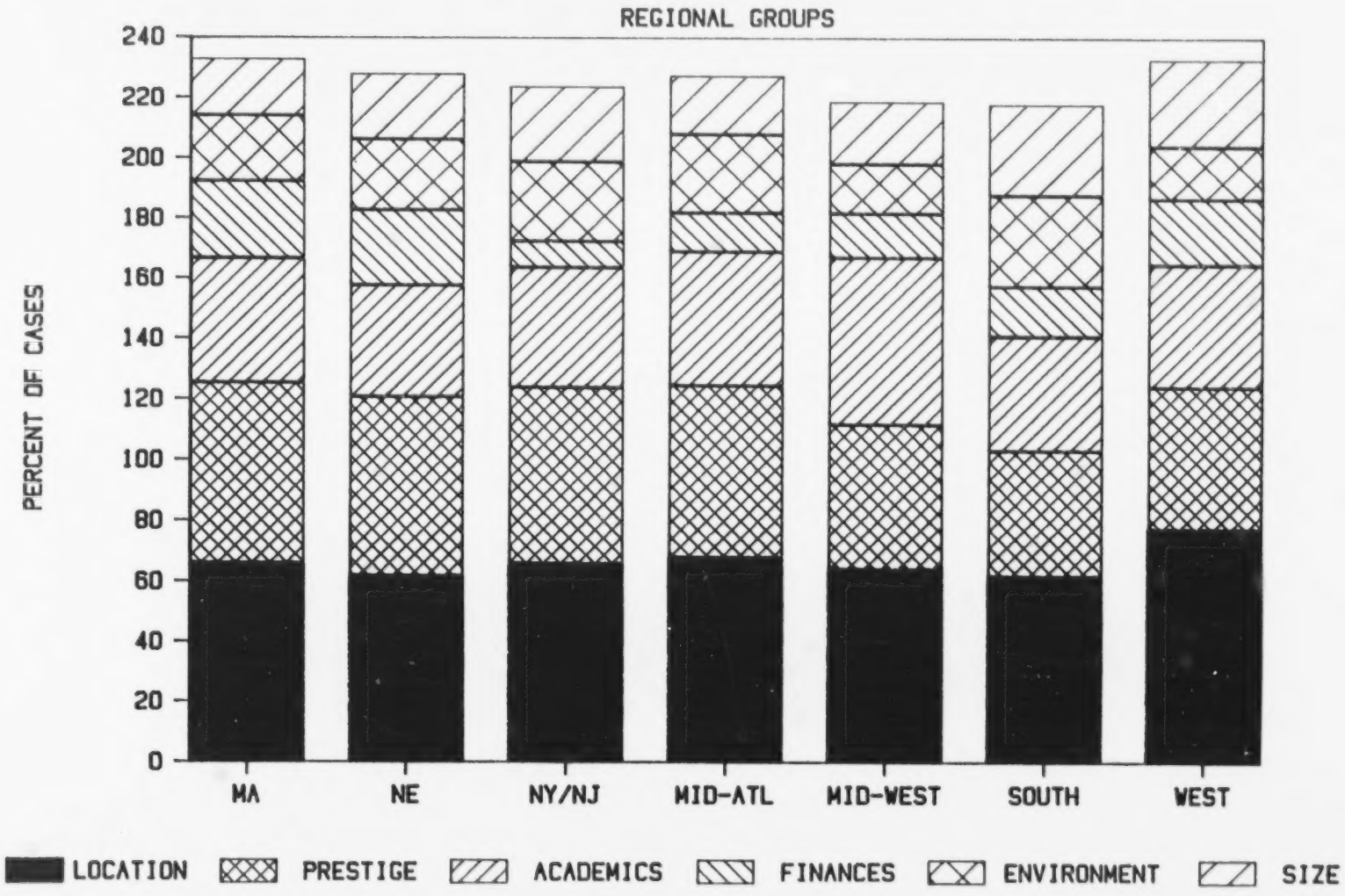
REGIONAL GROUPS
PERCENT OF CASES
240
220
200
180
160
140
120
100
80
60
40
20
0
MA
NE
NY/NJ
MID-ATL
MID-WEST
SOUTH
WEST
LOCATION
PRESTIGE
ACADEMICS
FINANCES
ENVIRONMENT
SIZE

TABLE 4

FACTORS INFLUENCING FINAL COLLEGE CHOICE
FOR
MATRICULANTS
CHOOSING TUFTS OVER CORNELL, PENN, AND NORTHWESTERN

	CORNELL		U. PENN		NORTHWESTERN	
Factor	Percent of Cases	Rank	Percent of Cases	Rank	Percent of Cases	Rank
Location	77.8%	1	90.5%	1	104.0%	1
Academics	66.7%	2	19.0%	5	36.0%	3
Size	33.3%	3	52.4%	3	44.0%	2
Prestige	22.2%	4	61.9%	2	32.0%	4
Social Environment	22.2%	4	33.3%	4	24.0%	5
Other	16.7%	6	4.8%	7	0.0%	-
Students	16.7%	6	14.3%	6	12.0%	6
Admissions' Activities	11.1%	8	0.0%	-	8.0%	8
Adult Influence	11.1%	8	0.0%	-	12.0%	6
Finances	5.6%	10	4.8%	7	0.0%	-
Physical Plant	5.6%	10	4.8%	7	4.0%	10
Athletics	0.0%	-	4.8%	7	8.0%	8
Postgraduate Jobs	0.0%	-	0.0%	-	4.0%	10
Number of Cases =	18		21		25	

TABLE 5

FACTORS INFLUENCING FINAL COLLEGE CHOICE
FOR
MATRICULANTS
CHOOSING TUFTS OVER BRANDEIS, BOSTON COLLEGE, AND BOSTON UNIVERSITY

	BRANDEIS		BOSTON COLLEGE		BOSTON UNIVERSITY	
Factor	Percent of Cases	Rank	Percent of Cases	Rank	Percent of Cases	Rank
Location	64.5%	1	40.5%	2	71.4%	2
Prestige	64.5%	2	83.8%	1	73.8%	1
Academics	48.4%	3	29.7%	5	33.3%	3
Social Environment	25.8%	4	32.4%	4	21.4%	4
Size	22.6%	5	18.9%	6	21.4%	4
Students	22.6%	5	16.2%	7	4.8%	11
Adult Influence	9.7%	7	5.4%	10	11.9%	8
Finances	6.5%	8	35.1%	3	19.0%	6
Other	6.5%	8	2.7%	12	2.4%	12
Admissions' Activities	3.2%	10	5.4%	10	7.1%	10
Physical Plant	3.2%	10	10.8%	9	14.3%	7
Athletics	0.0%	-	13.5%	8	9.5%	9
Postgraduate Jobs	0.0%	-	2.7%	12	2.4%	12
Number of Cases =	31		37		42	

TABLE 6

FACTORS INFLUENCING FINAL COLLEGE CHOICE
FOR
TUFTS' ACCEPTED APPLICANTS
ATTENDING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Factor	Percent of Cases
Finances	66.7%
Location	54.8%
Academics	39.3%
Social Environment	26.2%
Prestige	25.0%
Size	17.9%
Other	9.5%
Students	8.3%
Adult Influence	6.0%
Physical Plant	4.8%
Admissions' Activities	3.6%
Athletics	2.4%
Postgraduate Jobs	2.4%

Number of Cases = 84